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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: EXTENSION DECISION IN
SIGHT, LENGTH TBD

Classified By: CDA Michael Gallagher, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GONL appears poised to make a positive decision in favor of extending its contribution to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Uruzgan; the only significant remaining questions are: 1) for how long?; and 2) what happens next? Negotiations within Cabinet on the length of the extension continue, as PvdA (Labor Party) ministers are drawing the line at an 18-month extension followed by a phased withdrawal, while the Christian Democrats are hoping for at least a 30-month extension. The decision by the Cabinet to postpone discussion on several contentious domestic issues bodes well for a compromise on the length of the extension. GONL officials are hopeful for a government decision by November 30, followed by parliamentary hearings, debate, and vote prior to the winter break on December 20 -- but this date could slip yet again. Given fractures within the Labor Party, parliamentary approval for an extension will be contentious, but a majority is still likely to emerge. Dutch FM Maxime Verhagen hopes to make the argument at the NATO Foreign Ministerial in Brussels on December 7 that the international community must re-evaluate its efforts in Afghanistan by the expiration of the Afghanistan Compact in ¶2011. In turn, Verhagen plans to use the same "international rhythm" argument with parliament to lock-in a longer extension for the Dutch -- to leave earlier than the expiration of the Compact would be irresponsible. MFA Task Force Uruzgan Coordinator Pieter-Jan Kleiweg discussed these issues with polmiloff on November 20. End summary.

Exactly How Long Are We Talking About?

¶2. (C) Kleiweg acknowledged that the Dutch debate has shifted from a question of whether the Dutch will extend in Uruzgan to the length of the extension. He said Cabinet hopes to take an unofficial decision in favor of the extension on Nov. 23, following a briefing by CHOD Gen. Berlijn. Then, the GONL will officially notify parliament of its decision to extend on Nov. 30 via an Article 100 letter. According to Kleiweg, the Article 100 letter is "sitting in the computer, almost ready to be sent" with the length of the extension the only remaining blank to be filled. He said parliament will convene hearings during the first two weeks of December; the GONL plans to bring Afghan officials to The Hague to participate. On Dec. 17, Kleiweg said PM Balkenende will

present the case to parliament on why the Dutch should extend. Parliament will debate the extension on Dec. 18, and most likely vote on Dec. 19 -- "all in time for Christmas," Kleiweg said. He added that this timeline has been shared with parliamentarians, so that all involved know of the GONL's intention to have a decision in place prior to the winter break on December 20. (Note: Karen van Gennip, the CDA's Spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs confirmed this timeline to POLCOUNS on November 20. She suggested, however, that if the cabinet was unable to reach agreement by November 30, it would be better to hold off submitting the Article 100 letter until after the recess, effectively pushing the debate back until mid-January.)

13. (C) Regarding the length of the extension, Kleiweg described a complex negotiation between Cabinet party members PvdA (Labor) and the Christian Democrats. He said the Labor Party parliamentary faction's tactic to insist publicly on only an 18-month extension, followed by a complete withdrawal from Uruzgan within two years, has set the baseline for negotiations. Christian Democrats PM Balkenende and FM Verhagen want an open-ended extension to support NATO, but are pushing for a minimum of 30 months. Kleiweg said a number of other domestic issues are complicating the resolution of the extension time period, including revisions to a "dismissal law" on hiring and firing employees, and teachers' salaries. (Note: The Dutch Cabinet decided yesterday to avoid a further impasse -- and potential coalition crisis -- on the dismissal law by sending it to committee for further review. End note.)

14. (C) Assuming the Cabinet can decide on an extension length, Kleiweg said the next step would be to win the debate with Parliament. He pointed to a divided Labor Party, whose rank-and-file largely opposes an extension, as a looming

problem: the Labor Party in Cabinet may agree on an extension, but fractures within the parliamentary group may prevent the party from voting "as one" following the parliamentary debate. If such is the case, then obtaining a majority in parliament in favor of the extension "could be dicey," Kleiweg said.

International Rhythm?

15. (C) In that respect, and in the effort to obtain a longer extension, Kleiweg said FM Verhagen will lean heavily on the argument that the Dutch cannot turn their backs on the international community prior to the expiration of the Afghanistan Compact in 2011. Kleiweg said Verhagen will argue that an "international rhythm" or consensus is building in the Netherlands, Canada, and the United Kingdom in favor of examining progress and determining a way forward in mid-2010 prior to the expiration of the Afghanistan Compact -- to leave Uruzgan prior to this review would be irresponsible, Kleiweg said. He also suggested that an examination of ISAF be apart of this review, including whether it is then appropriate to end or recast ISAF to focus more on training and mentoring.

16. (C) Kleiweg said FM Verhagen will make this "international rhythm" case during the North Atlantic Council (NAC) meeting at the NATO Foreign Ministerial in Brussels on December 7. According to Kleiweg, Verhagen hopes to announce at the NAC that the GONL has decided to extend in Uruzgan (contingent on parliamentary approval), and then will push for Allied consensus on an international community review of efforts in Afghanistan, including ISAF, in mid-2010. Kleiweg said Verhagen hopes to take some "tangible agreement" on such a review away from the NAC so that he in turn can take it back to The Hague and lock-in parliament to extend in Afghanistan until the end of 2010.

Georgia on My Mind?

17. (C) Kleiweg acknowledged that the Dutch continue to look

at the Georgian offer of 200 troops plus helicopters as part of any extension plans. He said a Dutch MOD delegation returned from Tbilisi "impressed," and noted that FM Verhagen has dropped his political objections (i.e., Dutch concerns about Georgia's readiness for the NATO membership action plan) to including Georgia in an extended Dutch mission in Uruzgan. Kleiweg understood that the Dutch MOD had contacted our DAO regarding possible U.S. strategic airlift and armored vehicle assistance for the Georgians. Polmiloff noted a recent request by the Dutch MOD to approve a Dutch third party transfer of 18 YPR 765 armored vehicles (based on the M113) to Chile, questioning if such vehicles might be better suited for Afghan National Army or Georgian troops, given critical shortfalls in Uruzgan. Kleiweg replied, "that's a damn good question!" Regardless, Kleiweg said the Dutch did not expect to determine whether they will use the Georgian offer prior to the parliamentary debate, and speculated that they may end up taking "some, but not all" of the offer -- the Article 100 letter to parliament will be "sufficiently vague" to leave open the possibility of including Georgian assets.

Karzai Postponing?

18. (C) Kleiweg said President Karzai had planned to visit The Hague on December 19-20, but that some questions regarding the commencement of Eide may prevent his travel. Kleiweg speculated that Karzai had known far in advance that the timing with Eide might preclude his travel. Given the planned timeline to obtain parliamentary approval by December 19, coupled with the seemingly positive direction of the extension debate, Kleiweg suggested that Karzai's visit was no longer as vital as once deemed.

Comment

19. (C) An extension looks more and more likely, with the length of the extension and defining an "exit strategy" the

only real questions remaining. Kicking the can down the road on contentious domestic issues like the dismissal law bodes well for the Cabinet to reach a compromise -- the coalition is on shaky ground, and both Labor and the Christian Democrats do not want to appear as if they cannot reach agreement on two successive issues. Verhagen's "international rhythm" is consistent with what we have heard from MFA Political Director Pieter de Gooijer on the Dutch perceived need to reassess NATO's mission in Afghanistan in 2010. The Dutch will seek to build consensus with the UK and Canada when Verhagen speaks at the NAC on December 7. On Georgia, we have the strong impression that the Dutch believe the Georgian offer is more trouble than it is worth, and may be looking for convenient excuses (inability by USG to assist with strategic airlift and armored vehicles, objections from Australia) outside Dutch control to turn Georgia down. End comment.

Gallagher